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The metaseminar

Theses on education and the experience of critical thought

After a decade of the Bologna Process, the reforms are a cause more for concern than for celebration. They embody a narrowly utilitarian turn in higher education policy visible not only in Europe but worldwide. In a philosophical critique of the pragmatic reduction of knowledge, Boyan Manchev defines the university as "locus of the unconditionally political".

Knowledge without education is impossible. Education without institutions is impossible. And knowledge is also impossible without an ethos of knowledge, without freedom of thought and a community of thought. Is there a contradiction between these axiomatic conditions? Is it possible to strike a balance between education and the common work of conception, co-thinking and invention? In other words, can we find the right balance between the "community" of knowledge and the "institution" of knowledge?

To answer this question we must first consider the conditions for the existence of such an institution. It presupposes an uncompromising defence of the thesis that knowledge is disinterested. While interest or pragmatic use, application, social realization and so on enable the social existence of knowledge, they can neither be the grounds for knowledge, nor its *telos*. Powerful arguments need to be made against the dominant reduction of knowledge to its practical value, to its utility. The ideology of pragmatism, which reduces the meaning of knowledge to its immediate application, is based on an implicit metaphysical premise. Pragmatism always presupposes an orientation towards a specific point on the horizon: it presupposes an "Orient" of meaning that directs our thoughts and actions according to the conditions for accumulating goods and "the good". But what is this meaning be if the transcendent guarantor of meaning — or the infinitude of meaning itself — is rejected? Ultimately, it is nothing but the finitude of existence. But finitude is the very meaninglessness of existence. As a result, the experience of finitude above all means the failure of meaning; a rejection of every haven or guarantee of meaning. The pragmatic reduction of meaning — the reduction of existence "to" meaning as utility, as usability — appears tantamount to the reduction of life. This reduction is entirely determined by the logic of contemporary bio-capitalism: the new logic, form and practice of production. Biocapitalism claims to be an infinite opening up of space for the actualization of new forms of life, but in fact represents a reduction of the very condition of life, of its irreducible unconditionality. All of this necessitates radical opposition to the thesis that education must be bound to economic reality, since this is to transform education itself into a process for the pragmatic reduction of knowledge.

This uncritically asserted, commonsense thesis is dangerous. In the first place, it demotes disciplines not directly relevant to production, economics, finance, public regulation or social reproducibility — the disciplines that are directly necessary for the reproduction of economic and political structures. We only have to compare the funding for "pragmatic" disciplines with the resources provided for disciplines with no direct application. This pragmatic criterion threatens the entire system of knowledge, marginalizing the human sciences in general, but particularly the abstract disciplines, such as philosophy, which constitute the foundations of knowledge.

Second, this thesis calls into question the fundamental principle of the autonomy of the university, since it has profound implications for its structural dynamics, and for the overall economic functioning of a university as an institution. Moreover, accepted uncritically, and relying on the doxic pragmatic model, the thesis that education is the process of the pragmatic reduction of knowledge not only reduces the inviolable autonomy of the university, but also encroaches on the principle expressed by this autonomy. Yet this principle concerns the overall structure of something that has been central to the democratic political project for two centuries.

The thesis of education as pragmatic reduction of knowledge can and must be challenged — in the first instance from the position of critical economic thought. If cognitive capitalism itself is based on the models of production of knowledge, as analyses by Stengers, Corsani, Moulier–Boutang and Lazzarato show,¹ and if immaterial labour (in the university research laboratory) turns out to be a model for new forms of production, then the pragmatic reduction of knowledge to economic reality is retrograde and practically ineffective, especially in the long term. This is all the more true as financial capitalism plunges the world into a terrible "crash–test".² The university must not only resist the economic reduction of knowledge, and the potential to do so; it is also called upon to pioneer new modes of production, to build new models of social interaction and work ethics — to reinvent justice.

The unconditional task of the university

The prime task of the university is therefore to ensure the radical autonomy of the practice of knowledge. First, this means the radical autonomy of education. This is not a utopian project but an absolute necessity. It is an absolute necessity because the radical autonomy of knowledge and education are conditions, structural conditions, for the realization of a radical democratic political order. Without the autonomy of knowledge and education, the social world would necessarily be limited to the brutal reproduction of power and economic coercion.

In other words, the university must be driven by political logic and not by economic logic. The university must be the very locus of the unconditional priority of the political over the economic. This does not mean that the university should be aligned to political realities in the sense of political goals, interests or projects. The university is not a political institution, it is an institution of the political; it is not grounded in political actuality (to which it must always react critically, and in which it is necessarily involved, but which does not determine it), but is a realm of its very possibility. The university has to be a locus of the unconditionally political, precisely because the university is the institution whose calling it is to watch over the critical realm, the critical core of the public sphere, and consequently, of the political.

Hence the university must be an inviolable territory of critical thinking. A place where education and thought must not only be defended but also challenged: a place for the praxis and ethos of thought. This does not imply withdrawing from actuality and contact with the world; on the contrary, it means a space where the actuality of the world can be considered in a disinterested, in other words critical way (any critical position must be disinterested *per se*). Consequently, in forming a capacity for critique, the creation and development of critical instruments are a compulsory, immanent element of education. They are the second main task of the university as an institution of critical thinking. This critical realm — a realm of discernment, judgment and crisis (according to the etymology of *krisis*) at the heart of the public sphere — is by definition void. It is the non-appropriable void at the heart of the public sphere, belonging to no private interest that sets the conditions of its political existence. It is the intense but empty, ownerless heart of democracy. It does not appropriate, but possesses immanent resistance to any appropriation. And the university is the modern institution that has the supra-political function of defending and realizing this void.

If critique — and therefore crisis — is the core of the political, this means that the university, as an institution of knowledge and education, must at no cost reduce the crisis of knowledge and education. Knowledge implies more than simply self-sufficiency and progress. It must also carry a potential for crisis, and therefore for plasticity, for transformation. In other words, along with the technologies of knowledge, the space — the immanent space — of the exterior must be defended too. The awareness that the irreducible exterior inhabits the heart of knowledge is the critical awareness that allows not only *skepsis* and *polemos*, but also any invention: it is the inherent rhythm of thinking.

From this perspective, it is arguable that "peripheral" human sciences (those sciences that have least pragmatic use, especially philosophy) are fundamental not only in terms of the typology of sciences, but also in terms of political and critical potential. They are fundamental precisely because they have no fundament, because they are a place of experimentation, of "thought" and its critical potential, of the plasticity of existence.

The task of those who teach

The prime responsibility of critical intellectuals is education, in other words the capacity to communicate knowledge and critical reflection. This work of communication (not in the sense of communication theory, but understood as the radical exposition of singularities, suppressing the rigid normative borders and opening up a space for invention and plastic acts of actualization of transformability) must have an exemplary status for society. The university is, or must be, a locus for inventing new forms of sharing, inventing new languages, and ultimately a new kind of co-existence. As well as critique, it must also address itself to the plasticity of thought; an openness to other types of expression, other languages, other forms of thinking and of life — an openness to their potential.

This also presupposes a responsibility towards language or, more precisely, towards the preservation of the irreducible multiplicity of the languages that compose a single language or culture. Education has the task not simply of transmitting knowledge, but also of building new forms of expression, new attitudes to the world; it has a capacity for translating languages, discourses and idiolects. The irreducible multiplicity of expressions is the very locus of

the plasticity of thought, and of every culture. The more languages are expressed in a culture, and the more these languages interact, the more dynamic and viable a culture becomes. Imposition or dominance of a single language leads to the death of language. A single language means an absence of language, because languages are always a multitude; they always exist in dynamic openness to each other, in their exposition and intersection. At the same time, the university as a locus of the plasticity of thought must not totalize the presumption of translatability; absolute translation is non-existent, and translation always involves partial reduction. Consequently, any attempt to give rise to new forms of communication must be premised on the only possible common space — that of the singularity, and therefore of the untranslatability, of singular languages. This is actually the boundary in which the university touches the sphere of the arts, a "sphere" whose prime characteristic is precisely the opening up of homogeneous languages and the multiplication of singular idioms, and through them experimenting with the plasticity of existence.

New forms of communication involve new forms of community. Each age in the history of institutions of knowledge offers a specific model of the community of thought, which shares codes of communication, a specific ethos and a specific form of life. The ancient school, the medieval university, the modernist school of thought, and today's university "departments" have very little, if anything, in common. What is today's community of knowledge? Is it the so-called "academic community"? How can space for a community of thought be opened up despite the inevitable institutional pragmatism? It is precisely by exposure to the exterior — to students who come from the world, who are the exterior at the heart of the institution, the exterior without which the institution is impossible — that the possibility of community begins.

An institution of thought must open up space for plasticity of thought. This presupposes openness to the forms of life and thinking carried by the other, by the "newcomer", the "student". It requires sensitivity towards his or her knowledge, and towards the specificity of the methods of cognition and reception of knowledge. It must allow education as a transformation, as an alteration in which preconditions are not eliminated, but enriched and extended. The university institution is not the conservative institution of yesterday; but if it wishes to preserve something from its history, then this must be its capacity for dialogue, debate; a common search for truth.

In this sense, teachers are burdened with a great responsibility. They must be capable of living up to expectations: education must not only teach or transmit, but also open up thought; education must make sure that thought is not locked up in rigid schematisms and automatisms, but always leaves open a horizon for new actualizations. This means that the institution — of necessity a space of power — is immanently inhabited by the Other of thought, immanently exposed to the risk of limitation, of rigid repetition. The question is: how can the institution's self-limiting tendency be resisted from within? The only solution is constant resistance to the totalizing hold of power, and consequently to the monolithic totalizing figures of the subject, the homogeneous community and rigid conceptual paradigms. The university must not be a locus of solidification of rigid paradigms, of canons of knowledge, but of plastic modelling, of the risk of thought, of *skepsis* and *polemos*, and at the same time of the respect of the common rhythm of thinking.

To imagine an institution of radical freedom seems to be a contradiction in terms; institutions always presuppose a particular framework, in other words a

particular reduction. Nevertheless, nothing can stop us presupposing that there could be an institution that opens up space for the unforeseeable: a framework that fits into no framework. The university is precisely this hypothetical institution. Being an institution of knowledge and education, the university is a paradoxical institution by its very definition. It is grounded in paradox.

Can we think together?

Can we teach without falling into the trap of "educating" — that is to say, without tutoring, instructing, performing authority, imposing norms, surveying and punishing, and enjoying our power? How can we open up thinking without educating? Is it possible to mobilize a "common" (or perhaps it is better to call it "friendly") way of thinking? How would it be done?

Is it possible to think together? How can we "open up" the immanent coherences of singular thoughts? Does such an opening up of singularities towards the common not assert the partly metaphysical image of a "common" realm of thinking that precedes every singular thought? A universal potential of thought? No, because the singularity of thought, its singular experience, is irreducible to a totality; it is precisely its irreducibility that makes it thought. How, then, to consider the common realm of exposition of singularities of thought? The only possibility is to open up the immanent difference of every thought that allows its alteration, in other words its transformation into the alterity that inhabits it, the exposition of alterity. Consequently, the common realm of thought is its limitless plasticity, a realm I call "transformability".³ Entry into the realm of the dynamics of singularities is the necessary condition for the creation of a thesis or concept that simultaneously expresses the complexity of a given situation and the singularity of the event.

The university, a locus of unconditional freedom of thought and of critical resistance, has no alternative other than this radical experience of common singularity of thought, of the collective intelligence of the multitude.

Afterword

This text was originally presented as a lecture in the framework of the project "Education Acts", at the invitation of Krassimira Kruschkova and Arno Böhler. Today, I would have written it with a different focus, and with a different tone; more solidly political, and more pragmatic, in the sense of political practice. At the moment we are experiencing everywhere in Europe a tendency to reduce knowledge to mere pragmatism: the current situation in France comes to mind immediately as an extreme example, where the government's project for reform of higher education could lead to the collapse of all abstract and objective knowledge, reducing researchers and university professors to the status of low-level bureaucrats. So perhaps it is even more important to persevere in an abstract philosophical idiom, which indeed is the language of this text, thus reclaiming the concept's right to exist as an expression of the irreducible singularity and complexity of thought. Every restatement of this endangered notion appears today to be an act of resistance. Let us then persist in our resistance: in continuing to think.

¹ See in particular Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *La sorcellerie capitaliste. Pratiques de désenchantement*, La Découverte, 2005.

² I take this metaphor from Frédéric Neyrat. See his article, "Désintégrer. Programme philosophique", in *Rue Descartes*, no. 64: "La métamorphose, le monde", ed. by Boyan

Manchev, Paris, PUF, 2009.

³ More on the concepts of alteration and transformability can be read in my book *L'altération du monde. Pour une esthétique radicale*, Paris, Lignes, 2009.

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